Here's Robert Abplanalp: the Man Who Made the Spray Can Go 'Pfft'

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If you've ever pushed a button and made a spray can go "pfft," you probably have Robert Abplanalp to thank.

Isn't he the man who owns the island in the Bahamas that President Nixon visits?

He is indeed. But he is also the man who perfected the little plastic and metal valve on which most aerosol products depend. In doing so, he converted a debt-ridden machine shop into Precision Valve Corp., an international company that in 1971 was reported grossing $50 million a year.

Abplanalp—it's pronounced Ab-plan-alp and comes from the Swiss meaning "from flat mountain"—is the owner of most of the San Clemente property around the Western White House.

In a statement released yesterday, the White House announced that Mr. Nixon sold most of his San Clemente property to Abplanalp 2 years ago for $1.2 million, keeping only 5.9 acres of the 26 acres he originally purchased.

Abplanalp, 51, has a house in Key Biscayne, Fla., which is part of the White House compound there, and he owns Grand Cay Island in the Bahamas, a favorite Nixon retreat.

He contributed to Mr. Nixon's unsuccessful 1960 presidential campaign, but didn't meet his candidate until 1963. He told Mr. Nixon bluntly that he thought he had been "robbed" in the election, and subsequently retained the Nixon law firm to handle some of his company's overseas operations.

The two men struck up a friendship, and Abplanalp, who lives in Bronxville, N.Y., with his wife and two children, began mixing with others in Mr. Nixon's social set.

"There's no put-on about Bob at all," said one man who knew both Abplanalp and Mr. Nixon in the days when the President was practing law in New York. "He's an open fellow the President can relax around."

Abplanalp was born in the Bronx, the son of an immigrant from the German part of Switzerland. He was educated at Roman Catholic schools, dropping out of Villanova University after three years to open a machine shop. World War II interfered, and when he returned in 1946 from serving in the Army he found the shop $10,000 in debt.

He was scratching out a living three years later when a salesman offered him a new line of aerosol spray products, explaining that the only problem was that the available valves were expensive and unreliable. Abplanalp spent three months designing a new valve, then worked to cut costs and was on his way. His company now sells 60 per cent of all the aerosol valves in the world.

With the President and another close Nixon friend, Bebe Rebozo, Abplanalp sails, socializes and stays away from shoptalk. Their conversation centers around sports or business, rarely politics.

He stays out of the spotlight for the most part, and sticks to his businesses—either Precision Valve or Adirondack Fisheries, Inc., at Eldred, N.Y., a year-round trout preserve open to the public. Perhaps the closest he came to center stage on his own was in 1971 when he received a Horatio Alger Award for his "rags to riches" career.